

Health Service Occupations

Dental Assistants

(O*NET 66002)

Significant Points

- Rapid employment growth and above average job turnover should result in good job opportunities.
- Population growth and greater retention of natural teeth by middle-aged and older people will fuel demand for dental services, and create opportunities for dental assistants.
- Dentists are expected to hire more assistants to perform routine tasks, so they may devote their own time to more profitable procedures.

Nature of the Work

Dental assistants perform a variety of patient care, office, and laboratory duties. They work at chair-side as dentists examine and treat patients. They make patients as comfortable as possible in the dental chair, prepare them for treatment, and obtain dental records. Assistants hand instruments and materials to dentists, and keep patients' mouths dry and clear by using suction or other devices. Assistants also sterilize and disinfect instruments and equipment, prepare tray setups for dental procedures, and instruct patients on postoperative and general oral health care.

Some dental assistants prepare materials for making impressions and restorations, expose radiographs, and process dental x-ray film as directed by a dentist. They may also remove sutures, apply anesthetics and cavity preventive agents to teeth and gums, remove excess cement used in the filling process, and place rubber dams on the teeth to isolate them for individual treatment.

Those with laboratory duties make casts of the teeth and mouth from impressions taken by dentists, clean and polish removable appliances, and make temporary crowns. Dental assistants with office duties schedule and confirm appointments, receive patients, keep treatment records, send bills, receive payments, and order dental supplies and materials.

Dental assistants should not be confused with dental hygienists, who are licensed to perform different clinical tasks. (See the statement on dental hygienists elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)



Dental assistants hand instruments and materials to dentists and keep patients' mouths dry and clear.

Working Conditions

Dental assistants work in a well-lighted, clean environment. Their work area is usually near the dental chair, so they can arrange instruments, materials, and medication, and hand them to the dentist when needed. Dental assistants wear gloves and masks to protect themselves from infectious diseases. Following safety procedures minimizes the risks of handling radiographic equipment.

Most dental assistants have a 32- to 40-hour workweek, which may include work on Saturdays or evenings.

Employment

Dental assistants held about 229,000 jobs in 1998. More than 3 out of 10 worked part time, sometimes in more than one dental office.

Virtually all dental assistants work in a private dental office. A small number work in dental schools, private and government hospitals, State and local public health departments, or in clinics.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most assistants learn their skills on the job, though some are trained in dental assisting programs offered by community and junior colleges, trade schools, technical institutes, or the Armed Forces. Assistants must be a dentist's "third hand"; therefore, dentists look for people who are reliable, can work well with others, and have good manual dexterity. High school students interested in a career as a dental assistant should take courses in biology, chemistry, health, and office practices.

The American Dental Association's Commission on Dental Accreditation approved 251 dental assisting training programs in 1999. Programs include classroom, laboratory, and preclinical instruction in dental assisting skills and related theory. In addition, students gain practical experience in dental schools, clinics, or dental offices. Most programs take 1 year or less to complete and lead to a certificate or diploma. Two-year programs offered in community and junior colleges lead to an associate degree. All programs require a high school diploma or its equivalent, and some require a typing or science course for admission. Some private vocational schools offer 4- to 6-month courses in dental assisting, but the Commission on Dental Accreditation does not accredit these.

Certification is available through the Dental Assisting National Board. Certification is an acknowledgment of an assistant's qualifications and professional competence, and may be an asset when seeking employment. In several States that have adopted standards for dental assistants who perform radiological procedures, completion of the certification examination meets those standards. Candidates may qualify to take the certification examination by graduating from an accredited training program, or by having 2 years of full-time experience as a dental assistant. In addition, applicants must have current certification in cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

Without further education, advancement opportunities are limited. Some dental assistants working the front office become office managers. Others, working chair-side, go back to school to become dental hygienists.

Job Outlook

Job prospects for dental assistants should be good. Employment is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2008. Also, the proportion of workers leaving the occupation and who must be replaced is above average. Many opportunities are for entry-level positions offering on-the-job training.

Population growth and greater retention of natural teeth by middle-aged and older people will fuel demand for dental services. Older dentists, who are less likely to employ assistants, will leave and be

replaced by recent graduates, who are more likely to use one, or even two. In addition, as dentists' workloads increase, they are expected to hire more assistants to perform routine tasks, so they may devote their own time to more profitable procedures.

Numerous job openings for dental assistants will arise from the need to replace assistants who leave the occupation. For many, this entry-level occupation provides basic training and experience and serves as a stepping-stone to more highly skilled and higher paying jobs. Other assistants leave the job to take on family responsibilities, return to school, retire, or for other reasons.

Earnings

Median hourly earnings of dental assistants were \$10.88 in 1998. The middle 50 percent earned between \$8.94 and \$13.11 an hour. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$7.06 and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$15.71 an hour.

Related Occupations

Workers in other occupations supporting health practitioners include medical assistants, physical therapist assistants, occupational therapy assistants, pharmacy technicians and assistants, and veterinary assistants.

Sources of Additional Information

Information about career opportunities, scholarships, accredited dental assistant programs, and requirements for certification is available from:

☛ Commission on Dental Accreditation, American Dental Association, 211 E. Chicago Ave., Suite 1814, Chicago, IL 60611.

Internet: <http://www.ada.org>

☛ Dental Assisting National Board, Inc., 676 North Saint Clair, Suite 1880, Chicago, IL 60611. Internet: <http://www.dentalassisting.com>

For general information about a career as a dental assistant, including training and continuing education, contact:

☛ American Dental Assistants Association, 203 North LaSalle St., Suite 1320, Chicago, IL 60601.

For information about a career as a dental assistant and schools offering training, contact:

☛ National Association of Health Career Schools, 2301 Academy Dr., Harrisburg, PA 17112.

Information about certification as a dental assistant is available from:

☛ American Medical Technologists, 710 Higgins Rd., Park Ridge, IL 60068-5765. Internet: <http://www.amt1.com>

Medical Assistants

(O*NET 66005 and 66099A)

Significant Points

- Medical assistants is expected to be one of the 10 fastest growing occupations through the year 2008.
- Job prospects should be best for medical assistants with formal training or experience.

Nature of the Work

Medical assistants perform routine administrative and clinical tasks to keep the offices and clinics of physicians, podiatrists, chiropractors, and optometrists running smoothly. They should not be confused with physician assistants who examine, diagnose, and treat patients under the direct supervision of a physician. (Physician assistants are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

The duties of medical assistants vary from office to office, depending on office location, size, and specialty. In small practices, medical assistants are usually "generalists," handling both administrative and clinical duties and reporting directly to an office manager, physician, or other health practitioner. Those in large practices tend to specialize in a particular area under the supervision of department administrators.



Medical assistants perform many administrative duties.

Medical assistants perform many administrative duties. They answer telephones, greet patients, update and file patient medical records, fill out insurance forms, handle correspondence, schedule appointments, arrange for hospital admission and laboratory services, and handle billing and bookkeeping.

Clinical duties vary according to State law and include taking medical histories and recording vital signs, explaining treatment procedures to patients, preparing patients for examination, and assisting the physician during the examination. Medical assistants collect and prepare laboratory specimens or perform basic laboratory tests on the premises, dispose of contaminated supplies, and sterilize medical instruments. They instruct patients about medication and special diets, prepare and administer medications as directed by a physician, authorize drug refills as directed, telephone prescriptions to a pharmacy, draw blood, prepare patients for x rays, take electrocardiograms, remove sutures, and change dressings.

Medical assistants may also arrange examining room instruments and equipment, purchase and maintain supplies and equipment, and keep waiting and examining rooms neat and clean.

Assistants who specialize have additional duties. *Podiatric medical assistants* make castings of feet, expose and develop x rays, and assist podiatrists in surgery. *Ophthalmic medical assistants* help ophthalmologists provide medical eye care. They administer diagnostic tests, measure and record vision, and test the functioning of eyes and eye muscles. They also show patients how to use eye dressings, protective shields, and safety glasses, and how to insert, remove, and care for contact lenses. Under the direction of the physician, they may administer medications, including eye drops. They also maintain optical and surgical instruments and assist the ophthalmologist in surgery.

Working Conditions

Medical assistants work in well-lighted, clean environments. They constantly interact with other people, and may have to handle several responsibilities at once.

Most full-time medical assistants work a regular 40-hour week. Some work part-time, evenings, or weekends.

Employment

Medical assistants held about 252,000 jobs in 1998. Sixty-five percent were in physicians' offices, and 14 percent were in offices of other health practitioners such as chiropractors, optometrists, and podiatrists. The rest were in hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care facilities.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most employers prefer to hire graduates of formal programs in medical assisting. Such programs are offered in vocational-technical high